

Feminist Movement in India – an overview

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Abstract:

Feminism as an ideology developed in the West in the 18th century. The evolution of Western Feminist history can be understood in four stages, known as the various “waves” of feminism. Feminism developed in India during the 19th century. Feminism in present-day India has been showing some encouraging trends for various reasons.

The paper analyses the history of feminism in the West as well as in India. It attempts to examine the changing trends in the feminist movement in India, in keeping with the changes that have taken place in Indian society and also at the global level. The paper focuses on some current issues which the contemporary feminists in India have taken up and the new strategies and methods used by them to resolve those issues. It also analyses one of the contemporary feminist movements as an example. Thus, the paper is an overview of the feminist movement in India.

Key Words:

Feminism, Waves of Feminist movement, Gendering of Spaces, Why Loiter Movement

Introduction

Feminism¹ can be broadly defined as the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of the equality of the sexes. It includes seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to such opportunities for men. Feminism holds the

¹As a movement feminism began in the 20th century as a struggle for political rights to women. Feminism includes a wide range of ideologies as well as political and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish and achieve political, economic, personal and social rights for women (Beasley, 1999: 3) (Hawkesworth, 2006: 25). Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues concerning gender (Gilligan, 1977: 481).

position that societies prioritize the male point of view in the form of patriarchal ideology. Feminism attacks patriarchy² and efforts to change this system include fighting against gender stereotypes and improving economic, political, socio-cultural, educational, professional, and interpersonal opportunities and outcomes for women.

Feminism in the West

Feminist movement has campaigned and continues to campaign for rights of women. The evolution of feminist movement in the West can be understood in four stages known as the 'waves of feminism'.

As a movement, Feminism originated in late 18th-century Europe. Many believe that Mary Wollstonecraft³ was a founder of feminism. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, first-wave of feminism, Liberal feminism⁴ originated, seeking political and legal equality through reforms within a liberal democratic framework. It focused on overturning legal inequalities, particularly addressing issues of women's suffrage. However, there are certain criticisms⁵ against liberal feminism on the grounds of having middle class orientation.

The second-wave feminism (1960s to 1980s) broadened the debate to include cultural inequalities, gender norms, and the role of women in society. During this time, the liberal feminism was contrasted with labour-based proletarian women's movements

²Patriarchy is a social system in which positions of dominance and privilege are primarily held by men. It is used to describe broad social structures in which men dominate over women and patriarchal ideology acts to explain and justify it and attributes it to inherent natural differences between men and women. It is often extended to a variety of manifestations in which men have social privileges over others causing exploitation or oppression and women are treated unjustly.

³In her book titled 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' published in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft argues that there was no sound logic for denying women political rights. She also considered class and private property as the basis of discrimination against women, and that women as much as men needed equal rights.

⁴Liberal feminism asserts the equality of men and women through political and legal reform that is right to vote and education. Liberal feminists sought to abolish political, legal and other forms of discrimination of women to allow them the same opportunities as men. They sought to alter the structure of society to ensure the equal treatment of women. Issues important to modern liberal feminists include reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, voting, education, equal pay for equal work, affordable childcare, affordable health care, and bringing to light the frequency of sexual and domestic violence against women (Hooks, 1984). According to them, equal opportunities given to girls in education will lead to equal opportunities for them in other fields like employment. Therefore, they view education as one way of reducing the disadvantages of women by encouraging them to fulfil their potentials, which can lead to equality between sexes.

⁵Liberal feminism have been criticized for taking into account only a particular section of society, that is, white, middle class, and educated women's' perspectives. This criticism led to the creation of ethnically specific or multicultural forms of feminism, including black feminism and intersectional feminism. (Weedon, 2002: 43).

that over time developed into Socialist feminism⁶ based on class struggle theory. The second-wave feminism (1960s to 1980s) broadened the debate to include cultural inequalities, gender norms, and the role of women in society. During the same time, both of these traditions (Socialist and Marxist feminism) were also contrasted with the Radical feminism⁷ arose from the radical wing of second-wave feminism. It demands a radical reordering of society in order to eliminate male supremacy. Radical feminism believes that the defining feature of women's oppression is the male-controlled hierarchy, which it describes as sexist.

Many newer and different forms of feminism have emerged during the last decade of the 20th century. Third-wave feminism (1980s–2000s) refers to diverse strains of feminist activity, seen by third-wavers themselves both as a continuation of the second wave and as a response to its perceived failures. The earlier forms and types of feminism were criticised as focusing only on some sections of women, that is, only white, middle class, college and university educated, urban, heterosexual, or cisgender women. These criticisms have led to the origin of ethnically specific or multicultural forms of feminism, such as black feminism, intersectional feminism etc.

The contemporary or the Fourth-wave feminism (from 2000 to the present) expands on the third wave's focus on intersectionality, emphasizing body positivity, trans-inclusivity, and an open discourse about rape culture in the social media era. Post-modern feminism criticizes other schools of thought in feminism on various grounds⁸. The main point of criticism,

⁶Socialist Feminism connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labour. Socialist feminists think unequal standing in both the workplace and the domestic sphere holds women down (Bee, 2000). According to Socialist Feminists, the powerlessness of women is rooted in the four basic structures of society namely, modes of production, sexuality, socialization of children and re-production. Thus, institutions of economy and family are responsible for women's oppression.

Socialist feminists see prostitution, domestic work, childcare, and marriage as ways in which women are exploited by a patriarchal system that devalues women and the substantial work they do. Socialist feminists focus their energies on far-reaching change that affects society as a whole, rather than on an individual basis. They see the need to work alongside not just men but all other groups, as they see the oppression of women as a part of a larger pattern that affects everyone involved in the capitalist system (Ehrenreich, 1976: 4).

⁷It is a perspective within feminism that calls for a radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts. Radical feminists seek to abolish patriarchy by challenging existing social norms and institutions, rather than through a purely political process. This includes challenging the notion of traditional gender roles, opposing the sexual objectification of women, and raising public awareness about such issues as rape and violence against women.

Radical feminists believe that women can free themselves only when they have done away with what they consider an inherently oppressive and dominating patriarchal system. Radical feminists feel that there is a male-based authority and power structure and that it is responsible for oppression and inequality, and that, as long as the system and its values are in place, society will not be able to be reformed in any significant way. Some radical feminists see no alternatives other than the total uprooting and reconstruction of society in order to achieve their goals (Echols, 1989: 416).

however, is the universalistic approach adopted by other types of feminism which fails to bring out differences which exist among women, like class, race, sect, region etc. This perspective is a new type of feminism which incorporates post-modern and post-structuralist theory. It focuses on differences by analysing plurality of women's experiences and identities.

Feminism in India

Feminism in India includes a set of movements that aim at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic and socio-cultural rights for men and women. It seeks to achieve equal opportunities for Indian women. Feminists in India too, like their feminist counterparts all over the world, seek gender equality. It includes the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, equal political rights etc.

Like Feminism in the west, three waves could be seen even in the history of feminism in India⁹. The contemporary Indian society is witnessing the fourth wave of feminism, which began in India in the 21st century. It focuses on the empowerment of women. The fourth wave feminism is dealing with multiple issues¹⁰. It seeks greater gender equality by focusing on

⁸Judith Butler argues that sex, not just gender, is constructed through language. She draws on and critiques the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan. She criticizes the distinction drawn by previous feminisms between biological sex and socially constructed gender. She says that the sex/gender distinction does not allow for a sufficient criticism of essentialism. For Butler, "woman" is a debatable category, complicated by class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other facets of identity. She states that gender is performative. This argument leads to the conclusion that there is no single cause for women's subordination and no single approach towards dealing with the issue (Butler, 1990). Haraway, (1991: 149) criticizes traditional notions of feminism, particularly its emphasis on identity, rather than affinity. She uses the metaphor of a cyborg in order to construct a postmodern feminism that moves beyond dualisms and the limitations of traditional gender, feminism, and politics. Modern feminist theory has been extensively criticized as being predominantly, though not exclusively, associated with Western middle class academia. Mary Joe Frug, a postmodernist feminist, criticized mainstream feminism as being too narrowly focused and inattentive to related issues of race and class (Frug, 1992: 1045-1075).

⁹The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati (Ray, 1999:13); the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement and independent women's organisations began to emerge (Gangoli, 2007: 16); and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the work force and right to political parity (Kumar, 1998:).

¹⁰Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights and access to education challenging (Ray, 1999: 25-28). In the past two decades, there has also emerged a trend of sex-selective abortion (Sen, 2001: 39). To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against (Gangoli, 2007: 2). As in the West, there has been some criticism of feminist movements in India. They have especially been criticised for focusing too much on women already privileged, and neglecting the needs and representation of poorer or lower caste women. This has led to the creation of caste-specific feminist organisations and movements (Gangoli, 2007: 10).

gendered norms and the marginalization of women in society. It challenges traditional gender roles for men and women which are oppressive. It also focuses on sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual violence, the objectification of women and sexism in the workplace. Fourth-wave feminism supports intersectionality. It broadens its focus to include other marginalised groups, including the LGBTQIA and advocates for their increased societal participation and power. It further argues against sexual assault, harassment and gender-based violence. Internet activism is a key feature of the fourth wave feminism.

Why Loiter Movement

Gendering of spaces¹¹ is one of the many issues, the contemporary feminists are dealing with. It is interesting to look at how spaces get to be utilised in different ways by women and men in a given society. A patriarchal society differentiates masculine space (public space) from feminine space (private space). The spatial dichotomy of these two realms is expressed through the social domination of men and the subjugation of women. Public as well as private spaces¹² carry the imprint of social power.

As an example, we can study the Why Loiter movement that took place in 2008 in Mumbai. The movement aimed at claiming women's right over public space and creating a transformative change in the way public spaces are perceived in India. Women's presence and participation in public spaces and events has certainly increased from what it was in the past. However, the city of Mumbai still does not offer equal claim into the realm of public safety in urban streets and spaces. Mumbai is an advanced cosmopolitan city and is considered as one of the safest cities in India, still the access of women to public spaces is "at best, conditional".

¹¹ According to Daphne Spain, the term 'gendering of spaces' does not imply a certain way of designing for the two sexes, but a socio-cultural demarcation of spaces based on the way of life, perception and socio-cultural values of the people (Daphne Spain, 1992: 233).

As Cohen puts it, gendering of spaces is an important means by which social systems maintain the organization of gender. They reinforce particular ways of being a man or being a woman and can maintain the relationships between men and women. The gendering of spaces helps to reinforce a culture's gender norms (Cohen, 2010: 525).

¹² The public and private spaces are experienced differently according to race, gender and class. What is considered as "private" by some may be "public" for others, and what is considered as "public" by some often remains "private" for others. Valentine (1990) argues that women's inhibited use of public space is a spatial expression of patriarchy. Open public spaces such as heaths and woods and enclosed areas such as car parks and alleyways become gendered male spaces as a product of women's fear of confrontation. Patriarchal power is inscribed into the landscape through women's fear of violence. However, some areas are perceived as safe during the day, fear of all areas predominates at night. An important element in gender roles is the spatial dimension of power relations between sexes (Day, 2005: 570).

Women are taught that loitering is not a feminine thing. By loitering, women challenge the stereotypes and the label of a 'good girl'. It's not easy for women to loiter in public spaces, because these spaces are designed in such a way that it discourages women from venturing out. The presence of middle-class women on the streets of Mumbai at night fractures the lines between supposed "good" and "bad" women.

In the context of safety, women often need to create a sense of legitimacy in the streets. Women in public spaces are expected to demonstrate a purpose (waiting for a friend, getting back from work etc.). For example, while in a public space, women pretend to be calling their family, hold books, or hold an office bag to indicate that her presence is justified. Women perceive themselves as vulnerable and at risk even in a city like Mumbai. Women find themselves at the receiving end of moral policing in the name of safety. They can be leached, eve-teased, groped, stared and made to feel violated, possibly anywhere. On the other hand, men do not experience such things. They move about freely at any time of the day or night and expand their access to urban spaces more vigorously.

In making a case for loitering as a feminist activity, the feminists opine that "the struggle against violence and the quest for pleasure cannot be two separate things." The struggle against violence is premised on exclusion. It divides people into "aggressors" and "victims". On the other hand, the quest for pleasure is framed in more inclusive terms and is thus non divisive. The feminists believe that this right to loiter is not just for women, but for all marginalised groups, therefore envisaging an "undifferentiated right to public space." The only kind of feminism that is likely to be acceptable and popular in the 21st century, is a feminism of inclusion.

Conclusion

Indian feminism has worked towards changing the image of women as weak, passive, dependent, less rational and emotional beings. It has tried to achieve greater freedom for women in society by criticizing patriarchal ideology. It has adopted the newer and latest technology to reach out to maximum people across the globe.

We can conclude from the above discussion that,

- 1) Firstly, increasing economic liberty is allowing women to fight stereotyping.
- 2) Secondly, what women want is changing – from economic and political rights to social, cultural and sexual rights.
- 3) Thirdly, women are not vacating their spaces – they are negotiating harder to expand them.

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